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ON PAGE **A-15**

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President Defends Right to Protect Against Leaks

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WASHINGTON, April 9 — President Reagan said today that the Government had the right to protect itself against leaks of information in instances where American troops are involved in hostilities.

In defense of recent Administration decisions to restrict press coverage of such events, Mr. Reagan told members of the American Society of Newspapers Editors that they must understand the need for governmental secrecy.

The President's comment came in answer to a question that echoed concerns voiced Sunday by Robert P. Clark, the organization's president and a vice president of Harte-Hanks Communications. Mr. Clark and other journalists attending the conference had expressed concern that reporters were removed from the aircraft carrier Saratoga before the naval task force retaliated against Libyan missile attacks in the conflict last month in the Gulf of Sidra.

Mr. Reagan said the Administration had no policy restricting reporters in such situations.

But the the President added that "I think also that you must understand where we believe that there is an operation where secrecy is so all important, that you give us the right to protect ourselves against a leak of information."

Mr. Reagan acknowledged that such leaks had come from within the Administration, saying that "we found that the White House is the leakiest place I've ever been in."

As a result, he said the planning for the operation off the Libyan coast had been kept to a "few people."

The journalists had been flown to the carrier to observe the naval maneuvers, but were returned to Italy about two hours before the United States retaliated against missiles fired by

Libya. Navy officials have said they decided not to divulge information on the Libyan attacks at the time because the attacks had not been confirmed.

In the conflict, the Pentagon had declined to make operational a press "pool" under an agreement reached after protests by the press against being barred from the United States invasion of Grenada in 1983. The pool is designed to witness and report on a conflict on behalf of all the press.

Later, before the same forum, William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, reflected a similarly restrictive view. He said leaks of classified information had compromised sensitive sources and methods of gathering intelligence.

"Leakers are costing the taxpayers millions and even billions of dollars," he said, "and more importantly putting Americans abroad as well as the country itself at risk."

Mr. Casey said the Government had increased its efforts to find and punish those leaking secrets.

But the C.I.A. Director also said that in his five years in the post, he had seen numerous examples in which the the press has withheld stories or written them in a way that would preserve the confidentiality of intelligence sources. He said, however, that in 1983, press disclosure of American ability to monitor communications between terrorists caused a valuable channel of information to "dry up."

Mr. Casey's arguments were challenged by Howard Simons, a former managing editor of The Washington Post, who directs the Neiman Fellow-

ship program at Harvard University.

Mr. Simons said that much information in Government was classified and that it was virtually impossible for a reporter to do his job in Washington without bumping into secrets. Additionally, he argued that the secret stamp is often applied to cover up Government errors or abuses of power.

Mr. Reagan opened his appearance with a statement that urged the journalists to tell the story of "the savagery and inhumanity" of the Sandinista Government.

On another matter, Mr. Reagan said that Libyan leader, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, was a "definite suspect" in recent terrorist acts in which Americans have been killed. Hinting of possible American retaliation, the President said, "We're not just going to sit here and hold still."